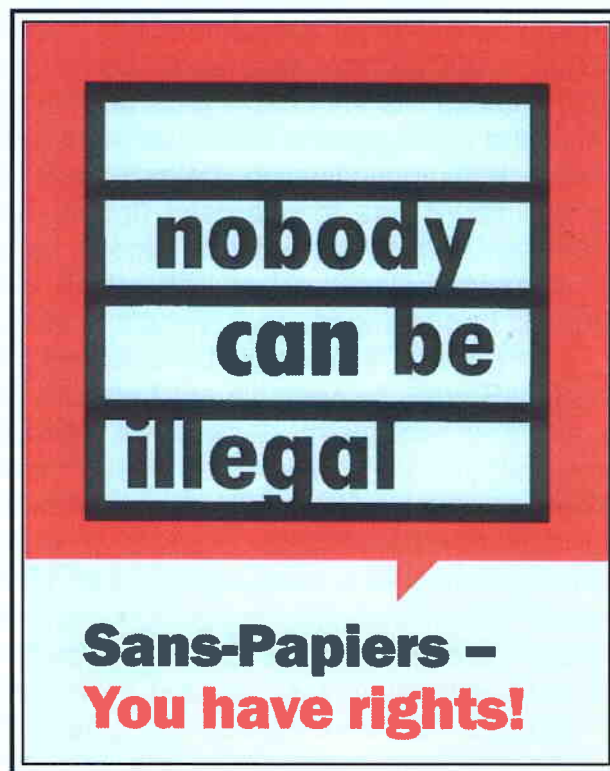


**Accessibility to the Health System for Sans-Papiers:
Comparing the Situation in Switzerland
on the Example of the Gynaecological and Obstetric
Needs of Undocumented Women**



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June 2008

Master Thesis submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of the Master of Science in International Health

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Recognised by TropEd



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ABSTRACT

As a result of large migration movements due to a globalized market and political instability or war and an increasingly restrictive immigration politics the number and diversity of undocumented immigrants in Switzerland has risen over the last years. For people from outside Europe it has become almost impossible to work and live legally in Switzerland.

The Swiss health system provides one of the best quality of services worldwide. The access is regulated via a compulsory basic health insurance. All people residing in Switzerland for longer than 3 months are obliged to obtain a health insurance, this includes undocumented migrants. Sans-Papiers, which literally means in French "without documents", represent a very heterogeneous group of illegal immigrants, their only common feature is the lack of a residence permit. Despite several epidemiological studies the number of Sans-Papiers is unclear and the suggested range goes from 80'000 to 300'000 people. As there is an economic interest on both sides they are usually tolerated in the country. In the past ten years there has been an increasing public interest which has led to the creation of Sans-Papiers organisations and subsequently specialised health offers. Even though international and Swiss law guarantee access to health services to all people, irrespective of their residence status, practically this access is very limited for undocumented migrants. Lack of information about their rights, lack of money, fear, language and cultural barriers limit Sans-Papiers in using the Swiss health system.

Several studies investigated the situation of Sans-Papiers. All of those studies examined the situation in selected geographical areas of Switzerland. Big differences in offered health services and the practical implementation of the national laws and regulations can be observed among the 26 cantons.

Sans-Papiers are healthy persons, aged 20-40 with women as the predominant sex. Women in child bearing age have a bigger need of health services than men and are more likely looking for help. Additionally Sans-Papiers women are suffering multiple discriminations, due to their sex, residence status, lack of financial means, and work options. Most women work in households or in the sex business. Therefore, the access to health services was studied among women of child-bearing age and above and especially in regard to their gynaecological and obstetric needs. In interviews, mainly via telephone, all relevant health service providers were contacted: 12 specialized health centres, 51 public hospitals, more than 60 private practitioners, family planning centres, independent midwives and birth clinics. Information from all public and private organisations supporting Sans-Papiers has been included, as well as an extensive literature review and interviews with Sans-Papiers women.

As expected, it was very difficult to obtain numbers concerning the use of health services by Sans-Papiers. All numbers, beside the ones from the Sans-Papiers organisations and health clinics are estimates. By comparing the statements of different sources it was possible to verify most information. The conservative estimation for women using medical care for gynaecological services is around 1200 – 1500 women per year. The data suggest that about 300 to 400 children of Sans-Papiers women were born in Switzerland in 2006. The number of abortions is estimated to be higher.

Even though health insurance is compulsory, it is often impossible or not feasible for Sans-Papiers to obtain one. It can be clearly stated that access to the health system for Sans-Papiers is still very limited despite many efforts and offers and the statement by the Swiss authorities that everybody living in Switzerland should have equal possibilities to use his or her health potential.